





# ***God and Evil***

***Three Essays***

***Argesh Siegel***

# ***God and Evil - Three Essays***

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## *I thank therefore I am*

Three living people have shaped my vision and polished my soul, and I thank God for blessing me with the opportunity to learn from them. My life has been enriched by their authentic teachings.

### **Professor Huston Smith**

Whose sincerity and clarity of expression pointed me toward the essential truth of all religions via awareness of levels of reality and consciousness?

### **Logotherapist Teria Shantall**

Who courageously revealed the meaning of the moment in her teaching and thus demonstrated the essence of the Logotherapy approach without which techniques would be worthless

### **Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Gottlieb**

Whose vast and deep grasp of the Kabbalistic teachings of Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag is matched by the authenticity and integrity in his own teaching and guidance toward perfection of the soul

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## *Preface*

My purpose in writing these two essays is to look at the “big picture” of reality with both clarity of thought and depth of heart. The resulting depiction of reality gives order to metaphysical ideas that point to the ultimate meaning of life.

*Aryeh Siegel*







## **THE PROBLEM OF PROBLEMS\***

The problem of evil might better be called "the problem of problems." That there is "evil" in the world can be expressed most generally by saying that there are problems with the way things are, that at least something is not the way it should be. I shall propose that the various possible resolutions of the problem of evil correspond to varying approaches that people generally take to the problems in their lives. In this way, a connection can be made between the problem of evil as discussed by professional philosophers - a problem concerning the consistency of beliefs - and the problem as often discussed by other writers - a problem concerning the proper response to the "evil" that we find around and within us. In the course of demonstrating the parallel between the philosophical and the practical problem, I shall elaborate on the contrasting points of view of exoteric and esoteric religion, and I shall conclude with an attempt to explain why the problem remains a problem.

First, let me present the problem from its philosophical side. The statement that something is not the way it should be seems to contradict the statement that God is omnipotent and completely beneficent.

Certainly, statements (1), (2), and (3) cannot all be true:

1. Something is not the way it should be.
2. God is omnipotent and completely beneficent.
3. It is logically impossible that both (1) and (2) are true.

Yet many people are inclined to accept each of (1), (2), and (3) as true. They have a problem - namely, what I am calling "the problem of problems." To resolve the problem, they must deny the truth of at least one of the three statements and, of course, must make any necessary adjustments elsewhere in their system of beliefs. (To avoid the problem would not thereby resolve it.)

Resolutions of the problem can thus be grouped into three categories: those that deny (1); those that deny (2); and those that deny (3). This categorization is not all that helpful, however, since divergent points of view will be grouped together in one category due to differing interpretations of statements (1), (2), and (3). In particular, the expressions: 'should' in (1); 'God', 'omnipotent', and 'completely beneficent' in (2); and '(1)' and '(2)' in (3) - all require explication.

Furthermore, the three choices I have listed are not mutually exclusive, because it is possible to deny more than one of the three statements. It must also be kept in mind that a denial of a statement can be based either on the assertion of its negation or on the claim that it is neither true nor false. Thus, it would be a formidable, if not impossible, task to list all the logically possible resolutions, even just in terms of statements (1), (2), and (3) (leaving aside varying adjustments of other beliefs), when taking into account their possible interpretations and all the combinations of their assertions and denials.

## II

Logic is one approach to metaphysics. Mysticism is another. Rather than by a list of logical possibilities, resolutions of the problem of problems can be categorized according to their correspondence with varying levels of reality. This will be my approach, but first I must digress on the subject of levels of reality.

Although the concept of levels of reality has become quite foreign to the modern mind, from the point of view of mystical philosophy, no metaphysical issue can be understood without it. This is primarily because the true answer to any metaphysical question will vary according to the level from which the issue is viewed. There is an absolute truth, but it cannot be translated into the language of the lower levels. Thus, even a so-called "higher truth" will not be true from a lower level from which it is considered, because it will necessarily be altered in the process of being brought down to that level. (We will see examples of this later.)



A rough analogy can be made using stages of life in place of levels of reality. Let us think of being middle-aged as a "higher" stage of life and assume for the sake of illustration that soybean is the best source of protein for the middle-aged. It still may be true that, for the very young, milk, and not soybean, is the best source of protein. What is nourishing (or true) at one level may not be so at another. This makes for a rather slippery game of catching the truth and partly accounts for the disrepute that has befallen the concept of levels of reality in a world where people just want to know the facts.

One may be able to get a hint of what it is like to experience a movement to a higher level of reality than the ordinary, terrestrial plane by calling to mind those times when the pattern of one's experience has been altered in such a way that cause-effect relationships have become more of a background phenomenon, an "accidental" feature of experience, while relationships based on feelings or meanings have come to the foreground of consciousness. Probably everyone has had at least a fragment of such an experience. Just as in

a novel, where the proximity in the text of two otherwise unrelated events can help to convey a deeper theme than the story line, so one can see at such times the necessity for the relative position in space and time of things that ordinarily seem completely unconnected.

It is possible that "just by chance" one will get a three on twenty consecutive rolls of the die, but when it actually happens, we would do well to check the die. Similarly, coincidences in life point us toward purposive explanations. When you consider the unusual rolls of the die together with the odd look in the eye of the fellow who handed it to you and the vague warning of your friend about dealing with this fellow, and then you see the whole story in a new light - this is analogous to a first glimpse of a non-ordinary level of reality.

A simple example on the psychic plane, the level of feeling, would be when, after hours of worry and depression, a sudden insight brings a ray of hope and at that very moment the sun bursts through the clouds for the first time that day. A mere coincidence? Perhaps. But less plausibly so

when the relationship is immediately perceived (that is, not consciously inferred), and when all of one's experience takes on this character. It is this immediacy of perception and complete repatterning of experience that justifies calling this an entry into another "world" or "level of reality." Within the psychic plane, one senses the psychic entity whose presence causes both the ray of hope and the appearance of the sun.

Reading or hearing of the lives of mystics who are wholly caught up in non-ordinary modes of experiencing can enable us to extrapolate from our own much more limited adventures in this area; and so enable us to see the latter as changes in the mind's filtering process in the direction of less filtering and more immediate perception of the one Reality that is the theoretical endpoint of this extrapolation. (Perhaps for mystics even the endpoint is experiential.) The rule appears to be that at higher or non-ordinary levels, one is less aware of oneself as perceiver; for example, the perceived relationships will be less defined by way of one's own feelings and more in terms of objective "meanings."

A convincing illustration of experiencing at the higher level of the celestial plane, the world of meanings, is difficult to present simply, because the quality of objectivity of the meanings is difficult to convey. Perhaps this will do at least to clarify the intended concept: On the way to Jerusalem, the city of holiness, you find yourself breathing sulfur at the shores of the Dead Sea, the lowest spot on Earth. It is immediately obvious to you that this is an instantiation of the principle that spiritual heights are reached via the pits,<sup>1</sup> and at the same time it is clear how in a hundred similar ways this principle has been continually shaping your life. However, the meaning that is attached to Jerusalem and the Dead Sea is independent of your feelings about these places, so that an awareness of *your* perception of the situation is not necessary in order to define it.

When every feature of life, however large or small, is thus seen to be shaped by the "meanings" that constitute higher realities on up to the One, it will then appear that everything is exactly as it must be. What is particularly to the point here is that judgments of good and bad are absent in the

experience of higher levels. They are replaced by the perception of things participating in varying proportions in two tendencies: the tendency toward the Infinite, a distillation of the essential stripped of its limiting forms; and the tendency toward the finite, a condensation into the material mold. However, the attractiveness of the first tendency makes it retain something of the quality of goodness, unless by virtue of one's own participation in the distillation process, even the distinction between these two tendencies fades away toward a unity that admits of no opposites. The level of the Infinite is the level of this unity, the level of being.

These brief remarks are intended, only as a beginning, to dispel an understandable suspicion that the concept of levels of reality is a philosopher's fiction with no possible basis in experience. The reader is encouraged to turn to Huston Smith's *Forgotten Truth* [New York: Harper & Row 1976] for a much more satisfactory depiction of the four-world hierarchy - that is, the terrestrial, psychic, and celestial planes, and the Infinite - with attention to certain subtleties that

would be too great a digression here. For a contemporary Jewish statement of the traditional four-world hierarchy, see Adin Steinsaltz's *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*.<sup>2</sup>

Actually, although reality may be seen to come in degrees, it *is* somewhat artificial to cut it up into definable layers. As Rabbi Steinsaltz writes, "the various worlds interpenetrate and interact in such a way that they can be considered counterparts of one another, each reflecting or projecting itself on the one below or above it, with all the modifications, changes, and even distortions that are the result of such interaction" (p. 3). Experience does not come neatly pre-packaged, and our conceptual arrangement of it is only to serve some limited purpose or other.

In fact, the hierarchy that I shall present for the purpose of understanding the problem of problems separates the terrestrial plane into two levels and the level of the Infinite into three - thereby distinguishing a total of seven levels. The following story illustrates these levels. The number of each

paragraph in the story is the number of a level in the ensuing discussion.

### **III**

I.

Once, a very long time ago, there was a jungle.

II.

In the jungle was a village. The people in the village knew the nature around them very well. They knew the best way to get from here to there with hardly a moment's thought. They could find with ease objects they had hidden in the jungle even years ago. From a flight of birds and a squeal of monkeys, they could locate a lion's kill a half-day's walk in the distance, and by such signs they knew when and where to find what they wanted. But some seasons many herds would pass by, and other times there would be few. The people wondered at this, and they debated the reasons for such mysterious changes and how they could best be sure to get enough food and hides and whatever else they needed.

### III.

Once, when the herds were few and the water was high, down the river came many very large canoes. No-one in the village had ever seen such large canoes before, though they knew the nearby peoples on the river and had heard stories of big canoes on the river in the time of the ancients. The people were brave and approached the bank of the river. The leader of the canoes came ashore to greet them. He was taller than they and wore a long robe, white and shining in glaring contrast to the dark jungle green. He explained that he was a messenger from the king. This was a great wonder to the people, for none of them even knew they had a king. Some had heard stories of a king in ancient times, but those were ancient times - and only stories. The messenger said that the king in his wisdom was creating a path through the jungle. He was sent to tell the people, so that if they saw strange movements in the jungle, they would know why and need not fear. So the people understood that the king governed their domain and that the lack of herds in that season was because the king's workers were in the jungle. They saw that the king was powerful, and they



didn't think to question why the king had decided to create the path, for they were sure it had little to do with them. But they did want to know whether there was any way they could gain the king's favor. So they questioned the messenger about where he came from. They were awed to hear of the size and grandeur of the king's world, where everything and everyone was carefully ordered in every detail.

#### IV.

After reflection on this, Hashav, one of the more adventurous young people in the village, began to wonder why such a great king would send a messenger to a tiny village such as this. Perhaps despite its small size and large distance from the king, the village still might be part of the king's concern. This idea became more evident once the path was completed. Then Hashav saw how his people benefited from trade with travelers from the king's city. He questioned these travelers about the king's activities and thus learned of the king's true nobility and justice.

V.

After a period of several years, having gradually acquired a finer appreciation of the king's nature, Hashav developed a longing to travel to the king's city. Even with the path, it was difficult to find the way, because he was often deceived and distracted by this unfamiliar territory in the jungle. Several times he would have gone completely astray if he had not remembered the stories of the travelers. Finally he arrived. At first, it was difficult to adjust to the grace and harmony with which affairs were conducted within the city. After a while, though, the city's charm overcame him, so that he could hardly believe there was any other way to live. The village was an impossible dream. As Hashav's movements became more in accord with the precise orchestration of the city life, he gradually found his way to the castle. Eventually, he was even permitted to enter the king's court, and - what's more - he actually stood in the presence of the king himself. Then Hashav began to imagine what it would be like to *be* the king. Before, the king's inner life was completely hidden from him. Though he had become somewhat familiar with the king's world, still it was always

viewed with the eyes of a villager. Now that his vision had become less narrow, Hashav was able to view the king's world from its own perspective, which ultimately would mean from the perspective of the king himself.

## VI.

Having been thus transformed, Hashav was now prepared to bring his new self to his old home. Before reentering the village on his return from the king's city, Hashav perched himself in a tree on the outskirts of the village in order to lose himself in his imaginings. He allowed himself to take on the king's nature, and as he did so, he looked down upon the village and saw his people busy doing the things they had to do to fulfill their needs. He saw that, as the king, he had the power to affect whatever they were doing in whatever way he wanted. So it was really his choice that they do exactly what they were doing in exactly the way they were doing it. Hashav realized, as he slowly withdrew back into being Hashav, that the village was as carefully orchestrated as the heart of the king's city - that, even in the village, it was possible to stand in the presence of the king.

Indeed, the king's greatness demanded that this be so - that his presence be equally available everywhere. With this realization, Hashav smiled and miraculously found himself within his home within the village.

## VII.

And the king continued to be the king.

The story begins with the jungle - life unaware. With no awareness, there are no problems. This is the level (level I) of those who say that ignorance is bliss. The village people (level II), however, are aware of possible improvements. They have problems, and they do their best to solve them by interacting with their physical environment according to their scientific understanding of it. Their attitude is expressed by the saying: "Where there's a will, there's a way." With the awareness of the king (God), comes the beginning of religion. Some of the previous unknowns from the scientific perspective are now understood. More important, however, there is an acknowledgment of something more than the secular world. We see that we have been taking ourselves too seriously. This is the level (level III) of those who say: "So

what if we have problems?" The recognition that "there's more" opens our feeling to outward flow and takes our mind away from the problems that were troubling us before. However, this is still a very unrefined religious outlook. It primarily consists of fear and awe of the power of God, His control of our lives being His most apparent feature. Its only insight is our creatureliness in comparison to the Creator.

Upon further reflection, one can see (as did Hashav) that God's presence in our world is not for His sake but for ours. This unprejudiced concern for every detail is His justice. The lack of herds is a problem, but it is caused by the path that will bring an even greater good. There is good and bad in the world, but the world is basically good. This is the level (level IV) of those who say that it all works out for the best in the end. Our problems are a result of a lack of understanding. We need to see the big picture.

But the big picture is still only a picture. The whole-hearted quest for truth must lead to a quest for transformation of being and entry into the

king's world. This is the level (level V) of those who say that those who have eyes will see that there really are no problems. We must learn to harmonize. Life is music. Listen, and your own part will naturally flow from you without any difficulty.

Beyond the level of seeking transformation, there is attainment and integration with life on Earth. This is the level (level VI) of Moses, who after ascending the mountain, was able to descend to the level of the people without losing any closeness to God. In connection with this level, Maimonides says of Moses that he could be occupied even with his bodily necessities while his intellect was wholly turned toward God (*The Guide for the Perplexed*, Part III, Chapter 5). And as Aaron ben Moses, the chief disciple of the founder of Habad Hasidism, has said [as explained by Louis Jacobs in *Reb Aaron: Seeker of Unity* (New York: Basic Books, 1966, p. 108)], this is not just a realization that from God's point of view there is nothing but God, but *even here on Earth*, from the point of view of revelation, this is an annihilation of all worlds that appear as something apart from

God.<sup>3</sup> It is not just that there are really no problems; there do not even appear to be problems, because the very distinction between a problem and a non-problem has collapsed into their single source. Since there do not even appear to be problems, there can be no approach to them that corresponds to this level. This is a reality completely without values, giving no guidance whatsoever.<sup>4</sup> Only when viewed from a lower level, this level may appear to provide an approach to problems. So while the zen archer does not check his shot's result for he sees no significant difference between hitting the target and missing it, we note that he hits the center every time.

## **IV**

We have just seen how each level has a corresponding general approach to problems. Moving from level II up to V, we have what can be called the technological, emotional, intellectual, and metaphysical approaches. However, given the above-mentioned intermixing of levels, the correspondence between a level and its general

approach to problems will not be that strict. With an important qualification, each level will acknowledge that different approaches to problems will be appropriate in different situations. Just as it would be inappropriate to create a revolution for the purpose of obtaining justice on a parking ticket (even when a revolution is necessary for other reasons), so, for example, it would be inappropriate to work toward a transformation of being as a solution to the annoyance of a dripping tap. Even at level V, wisdom would dictate that when the tap drips, you can tighten it. You need not get involved in something else, understand it, or harmonize with it. The important qualification here is that each level in terms of its central approach tends to upgrade the levels below it and to downgrade the levels above it. I shall elaborate on this in relation to levels IV and V since they are the levels of the religious perspective.

Level IV can be equated with exoteric religion. It looks at level II (doing) as the struggle to do what God want us to do. This is the physical work that is needed in order to fix this imperfect world. Level



III (feeling) is seen from IV as the requirement to make God the center of our concern - not just to fear, but also to love Him. Level IV (thinking) sees itself as understanding the meaning of historical events. Thus, level V appears to IV, not as the realization that things really are good even now, but as the goal of IV - that is, as the level we shall reach in that future time when all will be good. To the extent that V appears to be more than the goal of IV, it will be criticized as other-worldly and/or quietist. Or perhaps it will be seen as leading to a belief that sin should be pursued, for level V does not even consider sin a problem for God.

In fact, in the book *Tomer Devorah* (chapter 1, section 1), Moses Cordovero writes that God's greatness is most evident in His humility, and His humility can be seen from the fact that He permits sin, a sin always being an act against God. So the existence of sin, which implies that God actually supports the limbs and nourishes the body of the sinner, can be seen as the most powerful expression of God's greatness. Level VI, if it is acknowledged by IV at all, will at best be seen as

completely mysterious. More likely, it will be considered heretical and therefore dangerous. In particular, it will seem indistinguishable from nihilism as it might appear at level II.

Level V is esoteric religion. It looks at the work of level II as what is needed to align the worlds of the hierarchy in order to allow a free flow from above to below. In other words, it strives to make manifest in the physical world the reality of the higher worlds. Level III is viewed by V as a sensitization of the emotions to metaphysical changes that occur amongst the forces in the higher worlds. Level IV appears to V as an attempt to understand all changes in relation to their single source. Level V looks at itself as seeking unity with this single source. The attainment of this goal of unity is level VI when seen from level V, although level VI does not see itself or anything else as a goal.

Or behavior at level VI may appear from level V to be a mistake - a movement away from enlightenment, not a completion of it. To illustrate this, we can consider the complaint of Miriam and

Aaron against Moses as an instance of such a criticism. They accused Moses of not fulfilling the commandment to cohabit with his wife, the commandments having been given to everyone - the common person and, all the more so, those on the highest plane such as Moses. God tells them that Moses is a special case. As the commentary *Meshekh Hokhmah* says, Moses acts out of necessity, without free will to choose between good and evil.<sup>5</sup> If he does something while at this level, it must be approved by God, for otherwise he could not have done it. Moses' apparent "transgression" was appropriate because he really was at such a level, not because he was trying to get there (and this is why such behavior cannot be imitated). Only from level VI itself can one distinguish between such an exception and a loss of awareness (such as Moses' lapse at the waters of Merivah).<sup>6</sup>

## V

We have been concentrating on the practical side of the problem of problems. With this preparation, we can now make some connections to its

philosophical side. First, I shall categorize some resolutions of the problem by placing them within the hierarchy of levels. By now this placement should need no further explanation. Level I ignores the problem of problems. Level II denies statement (2), because from its point of view there is no God. Level III denies (2), because God is not completely beneficent. Level IV denies (3). For God to create a good world, He had to give us free will. Our misuse of this accounts for the problems ("evil") in the world.<sup>7</sup> Level V denies (1), because really everything is the way it should be. Level VI denies (1), because there can be no such thing as something not being the way it should be (nor can there be something that is the way it should be). I shall not be so foolish as to attempt a comment on level VII.

In the previous section we discussed the tolerance (albeit limited) of each level to other approaches to problems. Is there a parallel tolerance to other philosophical resolutions of the problem of problems, so that, besides its central resolution of the problem, each level will give some acknowledgment to the resolutions of the other

levels as well? At least some tolerance will certainly be allowed. For example, from the point of view of level IV, although it would be best if everyone were at level IV, still someone who is in fact at level II should believe the resolution of level II; that is, there is no point in deceiving oneself. It might even be added that the process of being honest with oneself will naturally lead one to the truth of level IV. This tolerance, however, seems much less than what we considered in the previous section, because there we did not just say that different approaches should be used by people at different levels. We said that, at each level, there are several approaches available.

But, on second thought, would there be a *need* to tighten the tap if we were completely involved in something else, or truly appreciated its place in the historical scheme of things, or fully experienced its metaphysical harmony? A complete understanding or complete transformation would no longer require any physical action to solve problems.

When the revolution is imminent, there is no need to handle the parking ticket in the usual way. The reason we could say before without qualification that each level acknowledges other approaches is that no level can be complete by itself (at least not any of II-V). Even in theory there are always phenomena that do not quite fit within the framework of an individual level (and in fact this is what eventually creates the impetus to move to a higher level). So a more complete statement of the approach to problems of level IV is that really what we need to do is to understand, but since our understanding is in fact limited, there are times when we should do physical action x or focus our feelings on y.

Does this mean that if we had complete understanding, we would not do the physical acts that God wants us to do? (Note that we have changed from the previous paragraph's "would there be a *need*" to "we would not *do*".) Since we cannot have complete understanding, this question is unanswerable. But in its place we can pose another question: Does greater understanding lessen the inclination to do these

acts? The answer of course is "no," because greater understanding may consist only of greater appreciation of the relations among events. The insight into precisely how they lead to an ideal conclusion and the consequent certainty that this conclusion will be reached would still be lacking. So long as this remains a mystery, it will appear just as necessary to do things in order to make the world come out right. In addition, to the extent that we can imagine someone with the absolute, objective certainty that "the goal" will be reached - say, someone somehow assured of his place in paradise immediately after this Sabbath - we would not conceive of this person, despite his having no goal to strive for, as now at a loss regarding what to do - that is, whether to observe the Sabbath. He would be like Moses at level VI; he does what God wants him to do, but *not as a solution to a problem*. He does what God wants him to do, simple because that is the way someone at that level naturally behaves.

We can now see the parallel between the tolerance of each level to the approaches to problems of other levels and the tolerance of each level to the

resolutions of the problem of problems of other levels.

For example, level IV<sup>8</sup> will say that really what we should believe is that free will accounts for the truth of (1) and (2), but since we have doubts, we can speak of God being less present or less generous at some times than He is at others. We want to generalize from the usual experience of level IV, where misuse of free will is seen as the explanation for the existence of problems, but sometimes it is just so obvious that we do not see it that way, that we are forced to make sense of our experience even in terms of the viewpoint of lower levels - although the lower levels will naturally be "upgraded" when viewed from IV. Instead of saying that God does not exist, we say that at the moment He exists (so to speak) in another "place," not here. Instead of saying He is not completely beneficent, we assert that He is completely beneficent *sub specie aeternitatis*, but not all that beneficent *right now*. (Alternatively, we can leave unanswered the problem of problems with regard to phenomena that do not fit into the general resolution of our particular level of reality



- just as one can leave practical problems unsolved. This is an upgrading of level I.)

Thus, we often pray that God's presence return and that He pour His generosity upon us. These concessions can be interpreted either as denials of (3) that provide explanations other than free will for the truth of (1) and (2); or they can be interpreted as denials of (2), when viewed with an eye to their similarity to the resolutions of levels II and III. In any event, since it is possible to deny both (2) and (3), there need be no contradiction within level IV. Level IV can even consistently draw from level V by claiming that God withholds our free will from time to time (as He will do throughout the period of the future paradise); but when this divine intervention creates problems, it is only the appearance of problems.<sup>2</sup> We see the influence of level VI when it is said that God's actions cannot be judged by our understanding of right and wrong.

The essential resolution of level IV remains the denial of (3) based on the assertion of the existence of free will. The additional resolutions

are consistent with this, but they explain those phenomena that free will seemingly cannot explain. With greater clarity of vision, we may later be able to see at least some of these recalcitrant phenomena as fitting directly within the framework of the free will explanation of the existence of problems. But then perhaps other phenomena will come along that will not accord with this latest vision, and so the ad hoc explanations will have to be appealed to again. This process can only be ended by a movement to a higher world, centering on a wholly different framework. Then, at this higher level, a similar process will unfold.

This explains why the problem of problems has persisted. If there is an end to our spiritual journey, a final resolution will come only then. It may be that arrival at level VI constitutes such an end; or there may be a lack even in this unity with God, since it is still not an identity with Him. In any event, it is clear that we cannot raise ourselves above the last rung of the ladder where the problem of problems is finally resolved. The gap between the world of values (however subtly

the values are perceived) and the stark reality of level VI can be bridged only by way of God's revelation. This gap is the paradox of our continuing struggle for an enlightenment that will teach us that there is nothing to struggle for. It is the secret of the knot of God's phylacteries that Moses saw on Mount Sinai in God's most open revelation to him.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the true nature of the world beyond this final rung - including its conclusion of the problem of problems - is a subject beyond what is already unapproachable.

## *Notes*

1.

Two of the many well-known examples of this principle are: Dante's journey to paradise by way of hell; and the hard times that will precede the Messiah. It is particularly interesting to see this principle in Malbim's discussion of the nature of exile. See his *Torah Ohr* on the section in *Numbers* dealing with the spies.

2.

[New York: Basic Books, 1980]. Rabbi Steinsaltz's description of the worlds may seem different from ours, since we have attempted to stay close to experience, while he has mostly just stated the metaphysical conclusions. In fact, he might place all our levels within the terrestrial plane as aspects of the higher levels that are intermixed there. Nevertheless, the essential characterizations of the worlds in his account are the same as ours.

3.

The statement attributed to Reb Aaron follows the explanation by Louis Jacobs in his book on Reb Aaron: *Seeker of Unity* (New York: Basic Books, 1966, p.108).

4.

Perhaps this is relevant to Maimonides' remark (The Guide to the Perplexed, Part III, Chapter 51) that he cannot be guided (or cannot guide others – his Arabic is ambiguous) by reference to this level.

5.

Rabbi Meyer Simha Kohen, *Meshekh Hokhmah*, Introduction to commentary on *Exodus*. It is important to note that Moses' apparent failure to follow the halakhah by not cohabiting with his wife is very different from the practice of some of the followers of the infamous false messiah Shabbetai Zevi, who thought that they needed to transgress commandments in order to get to a higher level (the complete return of the Divine Presence). Moses' "transgression" was appropriate because he really was at such a level, not because he was trying to get there, and this is why he cannot be imitated.

6.

As Rabbi Yehuda Cooperman points out in his commentary on the *Meshekh Hokhmah*, the *Meshekh Hokhmah* says that Moses was compelled *like angels* – to indicate that, like angels, Moses was still able to sin. An example of angels sinning is

their saying to Lot that we are destroying this place, suggesting that they, not God, are responsible for the destruction. Though this was not what they intended by their words, they are held accountable for use of misleading language – i.e., for their lack of awareness.

7.

Alvin Plantinga's well-known free will defense shows the consistency of (1) and (2) if there must be free will for the world to be good. The assertion of this last clause can be found, for example, in Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzato, *The Way of God*, Part I, Chapter 2, Section 1.

8.

A similar tolerance to other resolutions can be seen at level V, but we shall avoid explaining the complexities that are involved.

9.

For example, the *Midrash Raba* says on *Genesis* 49,9 that Judah was compelled by an angel to sleep with his daughter-in-law Tamar. Although this was an apparent sin, because he did not recognize her and thought she was a non-Jew (see the commentary Ohr Hahayim), in fact he was fulfilling

the commandment of levirate marriage. From this union will come King David and the Messiah.

10.

See Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet ("Rashba") on the Talmud tractate *Berakhot*, p. 7a.

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## **No Meaning without Ultimate Meaning\***

Our speech and thought rely on our ability to comprehend meanings, and it is natural for humans to perceive meanings in the events of their lives. So it would be extremely unusual for someone to claim that there is no such thing as meaning. However, I intend to demonstrate that acceptance of the reality of meaning necessitates the acknowledgment of there being ultimate meaning – the source of all meaning that requires no source for itself. For someone who adopts Viktor Frankl's view that God is "an ultimate being – paralleling ultimate meaning" (Frankl, 1975, p. 147), my line of thought could also be considered a convincing argument for the existence of God.

In order to demonstrate the necessity of such a foundation for meaning, I will first illustrate the significance of context in the perception of meaning. Any definition of meaning – regarding either linguistic or existential meaning – will always include a reference to a background (also called "ground" or "context") which endows the meaning.

For example, the three classical theories of linguistic meaning disagree regarding the significant element in the context of the symbol - objects (referential theory), ideas (ideational theory) or behavior (behavioral theory) - but all of these theories agree that meaning is a function of some feature of the context.

Addressing the discernment of meaning in life events, Viktor Frankl states that "...the perception of meaning...could be defined as suddenly becoming aware of a possibility against the background of reality" (Frankl, 1975, p. 141). Perhaps Frankl should have said "to perceive reality in the background of a possibility." For we are interested in the meaning of reality, not the meaning of a possibility; and it is the possibility that enables me to see reality as part of a wider picture that includes non-actual possibilities.

In the case of a doctor who remained depressed two years after the death of his wife, Frankl (Frankl, 2008, p. 117) presented the possibility that the doctor could have died before his wife and left her to suffer in his absence. In the context (and

contrast) of that possibility, the doctor's reality brightened, dispelling his depression. In addition to this example, the logotherapeutic approach generally recommends that we limit our possibilities by choosing to live in accord with a particular perceived meaning as opposed to other possible meanings. The wider context of possible meanings gives significance to our choice. For example, the choice to teach about sexual abuse rather than seek sympathy for an abusive past demonstrates the character of an individual by virtue of the contrast to different ways he or she might have responded.

The meaning connection between events is often revealed by means of synchronicity as I described in "The Place of Synchronicity in Logotherapy" (Siegel, 2013, p. 61). Synchronicity is sometimes called "meaningful coincidence" and can be defined as the experience of two or more events that are apparently causally unrelated and that are observed to occur together in a manner meaningful to the observer. Here too the meaning accrues via context; the different events "occur together" by virtue of their shared context, a context readily perceived because of the spatial or temporal

contiguity of the events. In Jung's classic example of synchronicity (Jung, 1960, p.22), the appearance of a scarab beetle at Jung's window is viewed as meaningful in the context of his patient's report of her dream in which she was given jewelry in the form of a golden scarab. This coincidence – improbable from a rational perspective – enabled Jung's patient to let go of her intellectualizing and express more authentically her emotional problems.

The notion of the background giving meaning to the foreground can be illustrated graphically by means of Rubin's vase (Figure 1) and similar figure-ground forms, where the faces in the background "give meaning" to the particular indentations of the vase in the foreground. Once we have perceived the faces, we understand that the vase is so constructed in order to "reveal" them.

Having thus noted the universal role of context in determining meaning, it is instructive and surprising to consider what happens when the context shifts to be more inclusive. Intuitively, any background can be perceived as a foreground to a further background. The event of a marriage can be viewed

within the context of a life; the life within the context of human history, human history within the context of the history of the solar system, etc. What happens to the meaning of the initial event (the marriage) as the context becomes more comprehensive? The meaning of the marriage becomes insignificant when viewed in relation to an extremely enlarged context such as the solar system or the entire universe. In general, as background vision expands – in space-time or in consciousness – foreground meaning constricts. Therefore after unlimited expansion, in the big picture there is no meaning.

In the words of Frankl: "*The more comprehensive the meaning, the less comprehensible it is*. And if it comes to *ultimate meaning...*, it necessarily is beyond comprehension" (Frankl 1975, p. 143). Meaning is more "comprehensive" when the background context is enlarged; for "ultimate meaning" the context is maximally enlarged. The result is "beyond comprehension" – a failure to find any meaning at all.

Our reasoning has led to an apparent absurdity. How can we doubt that there is at least some meaning or other in life, even if we do not know precisely what it is? Can all of humanity be deceived, and the search for meaning (so well-expressed by Frankl) be based on a delusion? When we put “the big picture” in focus, meaning becomes infinitesimal. But since people live their lives within their immediate world, very distant from “the big picture”, it is natural to ask: Can’t we just ignore the wide context and find meaning in the local background of our lives?

Yes and no. Yes, we are capable of ignoring pretty much whatever we want. But no, we can’t find meaning that way. We think we do only because we choose to be near-sighted, but limiting our vision does not alter the reality. Although our society may agree that the affairs of our small world are more important than events in the vastness of time, space and consciousness, when we drop this prejudice and allow ourselves to contemplate the wider world, we find that the narrow meaning dissipates.

My reasoning thus far can be summarized as follows:

- (1) All meaning is perceived in relation to a background context.
- (2) The background can be enlarged indefinitely.
- (3) Meaning diminishes indefinitely when perceived in relation to a background that is indefinitely enlarged, the limit of this process being that there is no meaning.

Therefore:

- (4) There is no meaning.

Since the conclusion (4) is unacceptable, we must examine our assumptions or inference in search of some difficulty. However, I shall spare my readers from the details of this laborious philosophical examination and develop a different tack that I proffer as the only legitimate way of avoiding affirming (4).

We have failed in the search for "comprehension" (as Frankl expressed it) - because we have assumed a rational approach to the perception of meaning. A non-rational approach would entail a shift in the perceiver rather than attempting to

clarify the conception of the perceived. As Frankl states in his classic text: "The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself" (Frankl, 2008, p. 115). That is, when our ego is simply forgotten in favor of empathy for others and our environs – we can experience a self-transcendence that constitutes a collapse of foreground and background. Since the self itself is enlarged to include the background, then the expansion of the background will no longer dwarf the foreground. We avoid concluding that there is no meaning, because assumption (3) no longer will be true.

Such "self-transcendence" may involve an outward expansion to include other souls, nature, etc. or it may be an inward expansion including deeper layers of self. For example, once individual consciousness is swept away, a marriage can be experienced as: a continuation to the next generation of the national identity; a harmonizing of all-pervading natural forces; or as an outward expression of an inward unity of the masculine



archetype of giving with the feminine archetype of receiving.

So long as consciousness expansion keeps pace with the expansion of the context, meaning will never be diminished. The exodus from Egypt was an event in history with individual meaning for its participants, but it remains significant even in the context of human history because of its potential meaning that is available to anyone who identifies with the spiritual process it represents. Similarly, my marriage will remain meaningful to me even in relation to a wide context, so long as I identify with the spiritual process it represents within that background.

Of course, not all of us experience self-transcendence, certainly not very deeply, and even more certainly not all the time. Nonetheless, Frankl stated that "self-transcendence is the essence of existence" (Frankl, 1988, p. 50). I believe this is true for two reasons. First, the ever-present potential for self-transcendence suggests that at every moment the physical is actually "nothing but" an expression of the spiritual. In this way, there is a

possibility of mapping the physical to the spiritual as an elevation of the lower reality to the higher - in contrast to a "nothing but" reduction (such as psyche to sex) to which Frankl strongly objected. Secondly however, the mapping will always be incomplete. That is, the expansion of the spiritual "background" can always be continued beyond whatever level of self-transcendence has been achieved. The limit of this infinite expansion is the ultimate meaning or purpose of all creation – "the essence of existence".

According to the modern-day Kabbalist Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag – who through great devotion in prayer and character refinement was well-acquainted with self-transcendence - the purpose of creation is for God to give, and the nature of creation is to receive (Ashlag, 2002, pp. 33-34). The unification of these opposites is the transformation of creation to acquire the quality of receiving only with the intention to give, and this transformation coincides with the process of self-annulment and self-transcendence unfolding within the world.

In the words of Frankl' "I can be the servant of my conscience" only when "my conscience transcends my self" (Frankl, 1975, p. 60). Each element of experience derives its meaning by its role within this process of self-transcendence – a role which is "not accessible to reason" without the context of "another dimension" (Frankl, 1975, p. 144) – namely, ultimate meaning – known only by faith and experienced as the limit of self-transcendence. We thus avoid the conclusion that there is no meaning only by acknowledging the possibility of an indefinitely expanding self-transcendence that has as its limit the perception of ultimate meaning – that is, communion with God.

In the end, everything is indeed meaningful as it is originally experienced within a narrow context, but having experienced self-transcendence, our vision can be readjusted and aligned with ultimate meaning. In this way, any meaning, though naturally initially perceived in a narrow context, receives its validity only by virtue of its alignment with the purpose of creation that informs all existence.

\* This paper is based on my presentation at the First International Congress of Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy in Haifa, Israel, March 9, 2015.



*Figure 1* **An example of Rubin's vase**

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## **Man's Search for Divinity:**

Self-transcendence in Logotherapy and Kabbalah

Love the other as yourself. [Leviticus 19, 18]

This scriptural verse sums up the approach of the spiritual life. Figure 2 presents the varying versions of this golden rule that is found in all major religions.

Contributing to the world is how self-transcendence is often described in Logotherapy; and acquiring the character of giving selflessly to the other is considered by the Kabbalah to be the single purpose of all religion – all its teachings in all their depths, all prayers and all ceremonies in all their detail – everything has only this one purpose – to create in us the character of giving selflessly to the other.

This view of the spiritual life was put forward by Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag, a 20<sup>th</sup> century master of Kabbalah known as Baal Hasulam. Kabbalah

expresses the essence of Judaism, and according to Baal Hasulam, "love the other as yourself" expresses the essence of Kabbalistic wisdom.

So it would seem that, according to this approach, Logotherapy and Kabbalah agree that the ideal life is a life of giving. Logotherapy sees this as meaningful, and Kabbalah sees it as the fulfilling of the divine will. However, there are two differences between Logotherapy and Kabbalah, and one of them is irrevocable. In order to explain the differences, please allow me to rehearse some basics that you may be familiar with.

Viktor Frankl developed the concept of the noological dimension in order to locate values, purposes and meanings in a dimension separate from the psycho-physical dimension. In the noological dimension we evaluate the quality of experience, and thereby receive guidance in our choices of direction. Also in this dimension of reality we perceive non-causal connections, as we discover the meaning behind the contiguity of events. "Synchronicity" is the name given to such meaning connection between events.



In his discussion of ultimate meaning, Frankl revealed that his conception of reality includes a theological dimension, which is the source of the meanings discovered within the noological dimension. The theological dimension is non-reducible to the noetic dimension, just as the noetic dimension is non-reducible to the psycho-physical dimension.

One difference between Logotherapy and Kabbalah is that self-transcendence in Kabbalah primarily involves connecting to the meanings of the theological dimension, whereas Logotherapy generally finds no need to seek out the ultimate meaning behind the straightforward meaning that conscience has discovered. According to Frankl, the search for ultimate meaning is what characterizes religion, as opposed to psychotherapy.

For example, I may find meaning in taking up the profession of tuning pianos, because it uses my abilities, provides a livelihood and independence, provides a service I value, etc. But I may fail to

consider the metaphor of tuning as a reference to seeking spiritual balance with all the detailed hints from the particulars of the process of tuning a piano. And I certainly will not attempt to, say, establish an intuitive correspondence between certain musical notes and certain states of soul in order to receive suggestions regarding what spiritual work needs to be done.

Self-transcendence in Logotherapy is primarily "horizontal" via enlarging identity within the psycho-physical realm. In "The Unconscious God" Frankl states that "human existence exists in action rather than reflection." Self-transcendence in Kabbalah is primarily "vertical" through enlarging consciousness of higher levels of meaning. All the meanings at any given level are emanations of meanings from a higher level, and ultimately all meaning has the Creator as its source.

So the search for meaning is in reality a search for divinity. This is the unconscious motivation behind all our efforts to find meaning, whoever we may be, and whatever we may believe. And the

purpose of our existence - the ultimate goal of our search - according to the Kabbalah, is to enable a transformation of our inner world – in particular, a shift in our intention.

In examining the nature of this shift in intention, we can discover a second, and more essential, difference between self-transcendence in Logotherapy and in the Kabbalah, which I now will proceed to describe.

Previously, I stated that the purpose of all religion is to develop the character of giving selflessly to the other. To give selflessly is to give without any self-interest at all. So long as there is some expectation of reward - even just a good feeling, even just a reward in the afterlife – so long as there is any motivation of self-interest at all, then some aspect of self has yet to be transcended. The natural intention of all our actions is to receive something for ourselves, and the radical shift of ultimate self-transcendence is to act only with the intention of benefiting the other.

Dr. Paul Wong relates to this point when he quite correctly chides positive psychologists for promoting the pursuit of something larger than oneself in order to achieve authentic happiness. As he states "doing things for the sake of personal happiness is contrary to the essence of self-transcendence."

However, in like manner, self-transcendence cannot be motivated only by the desire to experience meaning in life. But what then can motivate self-transcendence? Is it indeed possible to act without the promise of some reward, not even the subtle reward of a sense of meaning?

The answer to that question is necessarily beyond the scope of Logotherapy, for the question seeks a value more fundamental than the value of meaning. It seeks a motive for self-transcendence beyond the search for a sense of meaning. However, the Kabbalah does provide an answer, and I will give a hint of its direction by concluding with a parable.

Imagine your family is away, and your neighbor invites you to join his family for a meal. You are in fact hungry, but you decline the meal because it's unpleasant to receive in this way from your neighbor. However, your neighbor insists that his greatest pleasure would be in sharing his food with you, and after some back and forth on this issue, you agree to join him; because you realize that now you only want to please him, and that's not something to be embarrassed about. But naturally you can't please him if you don't enjoy the food.

The neighbor in the parable is the Creator who created the world in order to provide a means by which we could share the Creator's nature of selfless giving. However, the meal the Creator offers can be fully enjoyed only when it is received for the Creator's benefit – that is, in order to fulfill the Creator's purpose. This entails a life devoted to annulment of selfish desire and recognition of the greatness of the Creator's purpose. Outwardly, such a life will look very similar to the development and expression of self-transcendence as ordinarily perceived in logotherapy.

As Frankl stated – and the Kabbalah would agree – self-transcendence is the essence of existence. Self-transcendence as conceived by Logotherapy is a part of the process of adopting the Creator's character of selflessness, which is seen as the ultimate purpose of creation. Our motivation to fulfill that purpose – the search for divinity – is the source of our motivation in the search for meaning.

\* This paper is based on my presentation at the Ninth Biennial International Meaning Conference in Toronto, Canada, July 31, 2016.

## The “Golden Rule”

**Judaism:** Love the other as yourself.

**Zoroastrianism :** That nature only is good when it shall not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self.

**Taoism:** Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain and regard your neighbor's loss as your own loss.

**Islam:** No one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.

**Shintoism:** The suffering of others is my suffering; the good of others is my good.

**Confucianism:** Do not unto others what you would not they should do unto you.

**Christianity:** All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.

**Hinduism:** Men gifted with intelligence should always treat others as they themselves wish to be treated.

**Buddhism:** In five ways should a clansman minister to his friends, and familiars – by generosity, courtesy, and benevolence, by treating them as he treats himself, and by being as good as his word.

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